

America's Legislators Back to School Program

Legislator Talking Points

Talking with kids about representative democracy and how legislatures work is a great opportunity for lawmakers. The program is designed to teach students what it's like to be a state legislator- to put kids in the shoes of a legislator. The purpose of this event is not to teach about the three branches of government or how a bill becomes a law but rather to help students understand the pressures, conflicts and difficulties that legislators deal with in trying to solve public problems.

Program Message- core messages that should be conveyed are:

- Legislators care about constituents' needs and problems and what they think about issues.
- Legislators are committed to public service.
- Legislators deal with lots of competing interests- every viewpoint is heard on every issue.
- People don't agree on most issues- it's hard to find solutions to public problems.
- Negotiation and compromise are necessary to solve public problems.
- The legislative process is sometimes slow and contentious because of competing interests and lack of agreement.

Suggestions for Talking with Kids

- Deal with students in an informal, personal manner; be straightforward and real.
- Talk about issues that kids care about, for example, school violence, driving age, video game restrictions, smoking on campus, graffiti, competency testing to graduate, or curfews.
- Personalize the lesson.
- Send teachers your resume and a description of the activities you have planned for the class in advance of the visit.

Activity Suggestions

Kids will learn best about what it's like to be a legislator if lessons are personalized to you and to them. Following are some suggestions for activities that you could undertake with a class. These ideas will work best in classrooms rather than in large, all-school assemblies. NCSL discourages legislators from addressing large school assemblies for purposes of this program.

Legislative Simulation- (middle or high school students) This activity requires advance planning and coordination with the classroom teacher. Ask the teacher to work with the class in advance of

your visit to choose a public policy issue of importance to the students and to prepare a simple, one-sentence proposal to solve the problem. On your day in the classroom, ask several students to form a "committee" to hold public hearings on the proposal. Have other students present brief "testimony" for and against the proposal. Then have the committee members debate the proposal and make a recommendation on the proposal to the full class. Finally, have the full class debate and vote on the proposal. At the conclusion of the simulation, discuss how this exercise relates to the process of dealing with competing interests, negotiating, compromising and decision making that you experience in legislative life.

Solving a class problem- (all grade levels) Ask the students to pretend that they can have a field day to go anywhere that their entire class can agree on. Divide the class into three approximately equal size groups that want to do three different things (e.g. go to the mall, go swimming, go to a ball game). Ask them to resolve the disagreement and come to a class consensus. Assist them in negotiating, compromising and reaching a decision. At the conclusion, discuss how this exercise relates to the process of dealing with competing interests, negotiating, compromising and decision making that you experience in legislative life.

A day in the life of a legislator- (all grade levels) Select a page from a legislative day on your personal calendar (if possible, enlarge the page on an overhead slide) and go over that day with the class. A well-selected day would allow you to illustrate such things as dealing with constituent problems, listening to diverse points of view on a difficult issue, negotiating, compromising, decision-making and balancing your personal and professional life with legislative life. You could start the session by asking the students what they do in a typical day. Consider bringing along your spouse or children to talk about what it's like to be part of a legislator's family.

The perfect chocolate chip cookies (elementary school) Ask the students to decide as a class how they will make a batch of chocolate chip cookies to take home to their families. Begin by asking what makes a perfect chocolate chip cookie. When they are unable to agree, lead them through a process of deciding on nuts or no nuts, many or few chips, soft or chewy, thick or thin.... At the conclusion, discuss how this exercise relates to the process of dealing with competing interests, negotiating, compromising and decision making that you experience in legislative life. (perfect pizza, perfect school lunch, etc.)